

2006
DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE



Dr. Durgabai Deshmukh
1909-1981

DEMOCRACY AT WORK

Aruna Roy

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND
INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

DURGABAI DESHMUKH

A brief life-sketch

PERSONAL

Date of Birth : 15 July 1909 (At Rajamundry, Andhra Pradesh)
Maiden Name : Durgabai Rao
Date of Death : 09 May 1981 (at Hyderabad)
First Marriage : At the age of eight (separated after three years)
Marriage with : 22 Jan. 1953
Dr. C. D. Deshmukh

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

1939 : M. A. Political Science, Andhra University
1941 : B.L., Madras University

SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

1921 : Protest against status of Devadasis,
Muslim women and widows
1930 : Salt Satyagrah Movement
1931-33 : Imprisoned thrice, Insisted on staying in class C
1946 : Member of Parliament

IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONS BUILT

1922 : Balika Hindi Pathasala Kakinada (at the age of 13)
1937 : Andhra Mahila Sabha, Chennai/Hyderabad
1944 : Blind Relief Association of Delhi, New Delhi
1953 : Central Social Welfare Board, New Delhi
1964 : Council for Social Development, New Delhi

AWARDS/DISTINCTIONS

1946 : Member, Constituent Assembly
1952 : Member, Planning Commission
1963 : Doctorate *honoris causa*, Andhra University
1971 : Nehru Literacy Award
1975 : Padam Vibhushan
(Dr. C. D. Deshmukh also received this award
in the same year)

INTERNATIONAL AWARDS

1978 : Paul G. Hoffman Award
1978 : UNESCO Award

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Council for Social Development (CSD) started as an informal group of social scientists, social workers and planners committed to the national ideals of social justice and equality. Late Dr. (Smt.) Durgabai Deshmukh, the guiding spirit of the CSD, organised a Study Group of Social Welfare to review the situation in the developing countries and suggest ways for promoting social development. The CSD was given a formal status as an affiliate of the India International Centre (IIC), New Delhi, in 1964. When the activities of the CSD increased, the Board of Trustees of the IIC decided that the CSD should be an autonomous organisation and accordingly the CSD was registered in 1970 under the Societies Registration Act of 1860. It, however, continues to have a special relationship with the IIC.

The main objectives of the CSD are :

- (a) to undertake and/or promote the study of social development;
- (b) in furtherance of that end, to undertake studies;
 - (i) in the national/regional policies of social development;
 - (ii) in the process of planning in social development; and
 - (iii) in the interaction between social and economic development at various stages of national growth in developing countries; and
- (c) in particular to plan and promote;
 - (i) studies in techniques of social planning and programming;
 - (ii) inter-disciplinary research;
 - (iii) socio-economic/occupational surveys;
 - (iv) motivation for social change; and
 - (v) socio-psychological studies in rural areas.

DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES

Year	Speaker	Topic
1992	Dr. Suma Chitnis	The Institutionalisation of Social Purpose*
1993	Dr. Vina Majumdar	Women and the Political Process*
1994	Dr. Karan Singh	Population and Social Development in India
1995	Dr. Kiran Bedi	Concept of Management in Government
1996	Dr. Vandana Shiva	Trading our lives away: Free trade, women and ecology*
1997	Ms. Leila Seth	The Girl Child and Social Development*
1998	Swami Agnivesh	Towards a Spiritual Society* (text in Hindi)
1999	Justice Shri M. N. Venkatachaliah	Human Rights and Women in India
2000	Professor Leela Dube	Social Development and Social Research*
2001	Dr. N. H. Antia	Women and Health*
2002	Professor Mushirul Hasan	Islam, Culture & Politics: Awadh society in 20th Century*
2003	Dr. Pushpa M. Bhargava	The promise and problems of today's Biology and Biotechnology and their applications*
2004	Professor Anil Sadgopal	Globalisation : Demystifying its Knowledge Agenda for India's Education Policy*
2005	Professor Ram Dayal Munda	Globalisation and the Challenges of Tribal Development

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by

Aruna Roy

15 July 2006



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GLOBALISATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT

Aruna Roy

I have known about Durgabai since I was three years old. This was not only because many institutions were named after her in those days, but also because I had heard my parents talk of her with affection and respect. She was somebody I grew up with, and so, it is a special honour for me to deliver the Durgabai memorial lecture. Perhaps mine will be the last generation, which will remember Aruna Asaf Ali, Durgabai Deshmukh, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay and so many others; not merely as photographs of important women in a gallery, but as persons who peopled the milieu of our childhood. In some remote but definite way, they shaped our values.

Durgabai and Aruna Asaf Ali were women who worked in a different political context, where politics and social work were interwoven. Durgabai has been described as the mother of social work, but she also led the salt march in Chennai and spent time in a ,“c” class, prison having refused the special privileges granted to political prisoners of her stature. As political and social activists women like her occupied an important space, influencing and shaping not only women’s issues but those of mainstream politics. Just as we tend to compare the leadership of the independence movement with the leaders of today, it would be easy to contrast the women who were political leaders at that time, with many of the women who rule us today. But to draw conclusions from the role of high profile women in mainstream politics today, would be an unfair comparison. Even as a member of Parliament, or as chairperson of the central social welfare board, Durgabai never became a ruler, but remained in essence, a political and social activist.

Who are our real leaders today and what do they do? Who are our role models - are they the film stars, glamorous women, and glitterati, portrayed by newspapers; who are themselves monitored by manufacturers of cosmetics and fashion designers ? Are they Chief Ministers, Prime Ministers, and CEOs

of multinational companies? Or, is there in fact a different type of role model for leadership. There is even today, a kind of glamour in working for poor people, and fighting for causes. Medha , despite all the controversies about big dams , is an icon with her own kind of glamour. She is what many would aspire to be - known for her tenacity and commitment. She is a famous and familiar face - a popular figure in India.

The context of this lecture today, is 'Democracy' at work. To some it is no more than electing a Government to power every five years. Given our situation in India, we have done this quite ably. For many others, democracy comes alive only with a deeper understanding of the texture of responsibilities and participation; not only of electoral politics but of the issues of development and meeting peoples basic needs. Demanding accountability of the State to the people, is still often denied and termed as a threat to the sovereignty of the country. But this caricaturing of dissent is now questioned by large numbers of people. Despite many acts which lead us to question India's capability to govern itself through the prevalent democratic structures, there are numerous examples of remarkable collective actions which reinforce a different and more meaningful understanding of the underlying principles of democracy. Even those of us who see the intolerant face of the State on a regular basis, realise that India still has large democratic spaces one can use.

In many ways India has greater democratic space than the so called 'mature' democracies like the USA. It was forcefully brought home to us when my colleague and friend Nikhil Dey and I went to the US in March earlier this year. We took a brilliant five minute video with a 'song and dance' spoof on Bush made by K.P. Sasi called 'America America'. The short film very creatively and sarcastically calls the bluff on war and jingoism. Practically everyone we met were appreciative of it in private viewings, but were apprehensive about showing it in public. Despite all the suppression and oppression in India, our space to voice sharp criticism in the public domain seems to be more a part of our political culture than in the US, even within their own shores. We owe a lot to leaders like Durgabai, who were the architects of the independence movement, and who, through their commitment to democratic values even after independence helped create a political culture of plurality with space for dissent. The MKSS experienced this first hand, when the Ghotala Rath Yatra was created in 1997 to lampoon politicians who had used the religious mode of the rath to procure votes, while being exposed in scam after scam. When the "ghotala rath" barged into the grounds of a prominent temple in Jaipur singing to the

tune of a bhajan, but changing the words around “ghotala raj ki jai jai bolo, bhrashtachar kar hari hari bolo” we saw the expression of people change from reverence (in response to a bhajan). to shock (when they realized that the words had been changed), to delight (when they saw they saw, and became a part of the satire themselves).

There is of course the other face of the Indian ruling establishment. There are daily reports of atrocities against dalits, women, children, and anyone who is vulnerable, of violation of human rights, of economic crimes against the poor, of state violence and negligence. Sometimes it requires enormous optimism and hope to continue to struggle. It is therefore essential to be aware of the democratic spaces that exist and make sure that those spaces can be expanded. That is the true legacy of people like Durgabai.

The skepticism about the future of democracy and a reluctance to make any effort, forces our middle class into cynicism and apathy. Our intellectual middle class is silent more often than not. It is not that they do not think or are not concerned, but the immediate condition of their lives does not force them to act. This silence is going to lead to a huge deficit in the political, economic and social well being of the country in the years to come.

Whether it is the displacement issue, the slums being cleared in Bombay, the removal of hawkers in Calcutta, it is this deafening silence that is most worrying. In spite of the greatest odds, the poor speak out in large numbers. They have the courage born of despair, to face the police and the threat of violence to make their voices heard. This silence of the progressive middle class is all the more tragic because it can make a discernable difference .

Jeremy Cronin, the deputy leader of the South African Communist Party, who writes poetry, spent several years in jail during apartheid rule, and who is now part of the ruling coalition in South Africa, said that we have to face the democratic challenge of ‘speaking truth to power, making the truth powerful, and making the powerful truthful’. I would like to use this as a reference point for our discussion today.

Justice and power, are divided by a huge chasm. **“Speaking truth to power”** is an attempt to bridge that chasm, but it is hard to imagine the challenges of this effort. It requires tremendous courage. It requires doggedness, tenacity and above all it requires continual effort. That’s why so many of these efforts are quite aptly called *struggles*. Before my days as a social worker and an activist, I could not fully comprehend the nature of this ‘struggle’. One has to

simultaneously deal with external exigencies and the inner voices of doubt. Every inch is a battle. Whether it is going to the Collector and waiting outside the office for hours, or going to the BDO asking for minimum wages, to for wage workers, or battling for forest rights or living spaces, or going to the Information Commissioners who are supposed to be the allies of the people, and whose power and position itself has come out of peoples struggles, it is a struggle with no end in sight. It begins with trying to re-establish an entitlement which is more often than not, already written into law. How does one establish a legitimate entitlement? These are just demands, plain as day for all to see. But who will listen and who indeed, will provide justice. In the persistent speaking of the truth, one hopes that the indifferent will also be moved to support those who are suffering and are at the receiving end of an unequal battle for justice.

Let us start with the Narmada. It is an issue that is of present concern to us. Many of us have been concerned for years about what's happened in the Narmada valley. And I can see so many of you here who have struggled, fought, written, argued, debated for the rights of the displaced people in the Narmada. The Narmada has become symbolic, for all displaced people in India, and across the world . It is also a factual situation relating to the lives of people who are being displaced in the valley. The Narmada Bachao Andolan's contribution to the country has been its strength to stand up and speak truth to power. This country and the whole world has benefited from this struggle which has forced us to confront and acknowledge the fundamental dilemmas in the development choices and paradigms we have made. We fashion progress on the debris of human lives, without even acknowledging the human costs. The struggle that the NBA is engaged in now, is to try and make us understand that policy, no matter at what stage can be questioned, argued and debated, and if necessary even revoked. While we stand at a point of comparative despair in this andolan, we must also take stock of its extraordinary achievements. People in this country have demonstrated across the board that they can support a campaign like this. International participation has bridged communities and people across the world and forced powerful institutions like the World Bank to withdraw funding for the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Today the Andolan is at a point where things are very bleak because the ruling classes have turned their backs on the people of the Narmada valley. This country's rulers and their institutions have retracted on their promises to the people. Even the Supreme Court, which had so far ruled that rehabilitation must precede forced displacement, has now found the easy way out; turned its back on the reality of the lack of rehabilitation,

and said that displacement and rehabilitation can take place simultaneously. We know that the powers that control “democratic India” do not reflect the will of the people. They act under the influence and control of what money can buy. To regain control requires one kind of strategy, but there is also a battle on, today, to create space for a certain universal set of ethical norms. This is a more basic battle than the struggles defined by ideologies, because in an unequal world, truth and ethics are important allies against exploitation. There is also a need to unmask the kinds of exploitative policies that are often dressed up as ideological battles, but are actually smoke screens to divert attention from cruder interests of private profit and gain. It is self-interest that often dictates policy in this country today. To resist this, people who want to lead ethical and honest lives need to speak out, to enter into debate, even to argue in the public domain.

So we have to **“make the truth powerful”**. Gandhiji’s constant emphasis on ethics has much to teach us about establishing ethics in public life. His emphasis on how public figures need to live and delineate norms of an active public life, was a part of making the truth powerful by establishing its centrality in political decision making. He died when I was a year and a half old, but reading about him, and understanding his thought processes has helped shape my understanding of the role of honest and open democratic debate in public life. Gandhiji understood the importance and value of bringing all these debates into the public domain. When intellectual giants like Rabindranath Tagore, Ambedkar, and even Nehru disagreed with him, he made sure those debates, and differing opinions were out in print for people to read, to understand, to take positions. He gave central place to the concept of dissent, which is an important and vital democratic value. This commitment to democratic debate, even at a time when the struggle against the larger adversary was at its peak, created the space for public debate, which helped our generation form our opinions. Today, instead of Gandhiji, Rabindranath Tagore, B.R. Ambedkar, and M.N. Roy, we have “leaders” like Narendra Modi, Jayalalitha, Mulayam Singh and Uma Bharathi defining our democratic norms.

We are partly to blame for this state of affairs. The movements who are trying to use democratic spaces to draw attention to issues of survival, are finding themselves crowded out of a public domain that does not want to see its poorer side. It is not just the Narmada Bachao Andolan which is trying to draw attention to the plight of the displaced. There are today, womens groups, dalit groups, human rights, civil rights, and democratic rights groups screaming for attention to be paid to the exploitation of the vulnerable, the atrocities on innocent people,

and the suppression and violation of basic democratic rights, of those at the political margins who dare to question the status quo. It is not that the movements only have what is often described as a negative agenda. The Right to Information campaign or the Right to Work campaign, are reflections of an effort to forge a kind of politics which is responsive to peoples concerns.

We have in fact very few choices. We must make democracy work. Not in the limited way it has by going to the polls, or because some of us have been able to get some space to express ourselves. There are some who argue that it has only worked up to a certain point, for containing dissent, but it is in fact a sham. They point out that the misuse of power , the lies are given legitimacy by the system. It uses illogic in the garb of a scientific formula – equates poverty with unintelligence and as a corollary , the affluent with super intelligence. The ruling establishment regardless of the party in power, bribes, kills and terrorizes the courageous into silence and claims that this is in the interest of peace, law and order! Their contention is that it quells all opposition, so where is the democracy?

Therefore what we need to establish is, that if democracy has to be sustained in India, we'll have to make people in power hear the truth and take it into account. To force the ruling elite to listen, we will have to state our views from where movements and deprived people stand, but it has to come from people like those in this audience. The privileged will have to recognize, that in more fundamental ways than they perhaps realize, their freedom and their space is also linked to those being displaced from the Narmada valley and the jhopad patties in Delhi and Mumbai.

Martin Niemöller's poem continues to make a deep impression on me since I heard it 30 years or so ago.

They came first for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me,
and by that time no one was left to speak up.

It is important for those of us who cherish democracy to perceive chain of connectivity. When somebody's powers are being whittled away, when self expression is being limited, the right to live is being questioned and we keep quiet, we become party to those crimes and give silent assent to these acts, and strength to their architects. Neutrality is a strange concept in politics. Bishop Desmond Tutu, who has a host of fables to unmask our hypocrisy points out that "If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." There is an important role for a privileged and affluent class who are unhappy with injustice they see around them. They must face the truth, and ensure that the voice of truth is heard. It means actively forming alliances with those fighting for justice. Otherwise, as Paulo Freire has said "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral."

Civil Society is a new term being used these days which people like Durgabai did not have to deal with. While it seems to confuse more than accurately describe anyone in India, I shall use it to describe the people who come from a class that there is a comfort level with culture, language, and mores of behaviour. It also seems to be, a deliberate attempt to de-politicize processes of socio economic change. A political worker cannot be a part of civil society- supposedly by definition. A social worker is. And so, those who are a part of civil society should never be political. What would Durgabai, who was considered the mother of social work, but a person who led andolans, went to jail, and was later a member of parliament be described as ? In today's context she would have to have shed her political side, I suppose to be accepted as a member of civil society.

The movements of the marginalised and those who represent them are not accepted as part of civil society either. Sometimes we are literally seen as "uncivilized" and therefore unacceptable. The people's movements, are "*Sadak Chaap*". Civil society is certainly consists of those who can enter the IIC. Some of us may be like the chameleon and merge into the cultural ambience of either world. But we are a small minority. I urge you all today, to face the truth, to take sides, to become more political , even if it means shedding the garb of being a part of civil society. As citizens of a democracy, we have to speak out clearly without worrying about the consequences. It is only then, that we can help "make the truth powerful." And at moments when this happens unexpected changes do take place, and important breakthroughs are made.

The passage of the Right to Information and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Acts were important breakthroughs. Their passage was not dependent on the support of “civil society” alone. While the right to Information Act did receive important support from civil society, and is now being used extensively by members of civil society, we must remember that the andolan in both rural and urban areas was the result of the struggles of the poor. While we owe the Act to the poor, the voice and interest of the progressive middle class did contribute to the enactment of a very fine piece of legislation. It is a law which will help uncover the truth.

But there are tragedies occurring in this country on a daily basis, faced by a deafening silence. We read of farmers’ suicides, and seem to want to push the issue out of our minds, out of conversations, and out of the pages of newspapers themselves. How many of us feel concerned enough to go to the root cause of the farmers desperation, and see what we can do about it.

All modes of production in this country are getting hijacked and eroded. I wonder how many of you know that Banarasi Sarees, and rakhis are being made in China and are being sold at half the price. If you go to any way-side Dhaba now between Delhi and where I live in Bhim, ordinary consumer items now come from China. The much sought after “foreign goods” now dominate our local markets. Since they are cheaper, wrist watches, pens, battery cells and so on are sold quicker. What’s going to happen to the production capacity of this huge country, for which we all fought during Independence ? And what now of Gandhiji’s charkha the symbol of Indian self reliance and economic independence ? This is economic suicide. This is not to question the need for trade and imports, but you cannot finish off the production capacity and consequently the livelihood of large numbers of the people of the country, and still call it development!!

What are the options in front of the farmers who go to the market in Bhim, when *Tuar ka dal* from Australia is sold much cheaper than our own ? I heard from a reliable source that the seed for *Tuar ka dal* imported from India, is being planted in Australia with the sole intention of exports to India. What will happen to the farmers in Madhya Pradesh and other states who grow *Tuar ka dal* and later to the consumer, when the local farmer stops growing it and imports become very expensive ?

These are not part of the concern of our political mainstream. And because of a statistic called the growth rate, it is even celebrated by our economic

mainstream. We are so busy buying our cars, and other consumer goods we do not have time to examine or question these trends. If we don't question the terms and conditions of our growth today, I do wonder about our future capacity to chart our own course. What kind of democracy is it, if the decisions about our local markets and production are being decided beyond even our national parliament.

I remember at the World Social Forum in Mumbai, Captain Lakshmi Sehgal said : "One East India Company came to India and for hundreds of years we were slaves, now there are hundreds of East India Companies coming into this country, I don't know how long we are going to be enslaved now. " This may not appear to be so and we may retain the vestiges of our independence. The appalling question is from our own politicians, how can they surrender their minds and souls to the economic designs of a few powerful people ? What are our options for action?

In some ways every one of farmers who commits suicide, is really speaking truth to power. He is saying I cannot live, you are forcing me to commit suicide. We tend to see the farmer who commits suicide as a nuisance. We have ceased to realize how important a contribution farming makes to the self reliance and independence of India. The primary producers are the unsung heroes of our times. Women's groups that made Rakhis will no longer be able to make them; men and women who make *papad* or chips will be out of jobs... All our little hawkers in the streets, will soon be displaced by giant malls with "kms of shopping". This is not because hawkers are not needed. After all even under the great free market there is an economic reason for hawkers to exist- they are cheaper and more accessible. But how will malls function if hawkers sit on their door steps ? So where it serves the purpose of the same capitalist spokesperson of the free market, the market cannot but the courts decide! Where is justice for all these displaced people?

We have to speak truth to power, and make the truth powerful, not merely for the poor but for ourselves. We are but links in the chain, and the gods of profit have an ever increasing appetite.

The two Acts that have come into place, the **Right to Information Act** and **the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act**, provide us some space to make the truth powerful. Let us look at recent experiences of the Right to Information Campaign. In the last fortnight there has been a campaign launched called the, "Drive against Bribe". It was a media and citizens campaign to

bring the Act at everybody's doorstep. The act of forcing disclosure will go a long way in replacing the apathy and indifference to give and take bribes.

The bureaucracy for its own reasons does not want this act even today. If you go into government offices you will find that the Public Information Officer is not in place. If you find the Public Information Officer, he most often doesn't even know the Law. Even when I went to office of the SDO and the Tehsildar in Beawar and I looked at their files, they didn't have a copy of the Law, nor a copy of the rules. All they had was the Tata Consultancy Service's note on using IT for implementing the RTI law. What could he use IT for, if he was not familiar with the law? There is a greater vested interest in the use of computers, and obviously far less in the use of the right to information !! The Tehsildar said: क्या करू मेरे पास कानून ही नहीं है, तो मैं देख के क्या बात सकता हूँ, यही कागज़ है आप देख लीजिए।

In every single government office there should have been a board outside telling you everything about that office on the 13th of October 2005, when this Law came into force. Information required to be posted at a public place under section 4 of the Act is absent from almost all places, even in Rajasthan. In Jaipur the government says it does not have the money to paint the boards. The real reason is that once the boards are in place, information will be out, and there is much to conceal.

Then people who apply for information are denied the information, in many different ways. A famous Rajasthani folk story which my friend Shankar loves quoting comes to my mind.

एक ठाकुर था, और वो शराबी था। तो रात को नशे में सोता था, ठाकुरानी ने कहा कामदार को “भाई इसको रोज रात को एक गिलास दूध पिलाना।” तो कामदार ने सोचा ये तो नशे में रहता है तो इसको क्यों दूध पिलाये। पाव बरतो में पी जाता हूँ, पानी डाल दूँगा। तो कुछ दिन पाव भर पानी डाला। एक पाव पानी डालके उसको पिलाता रहा। फिर कुछ दिन बाद आधा किलो पानी डालने लगा... फिर तीन चौथाई पानी, फिर पूरा पानी डालके केवल ठाकुर साहब के मूछों में मलाई चडादिया। मो ठाकुर साहब सुबह उठके सोचा, उसने कहा यार तूने दुध ही नहीं पिलाया मुझे। मेने कहा, साहब आप को गलत फहमी है, देखिए आप की मूछ पे मलाई लगी हुई है। तो सरकार ने हमारे साथ यही किया। तो अब हम बोलने लग रहे है तो उनको अकड रहा है।

They don't simply like the fact that the people are demanding their right to know the reasons for their suffering. Like the Thakur, people were unconscious of the ways and means by which they were defrauded of their right. Today they know. No more satisfied with the cream on our moustaches, we want the full glass of milk that is ours !!

The resistance in the system is mounting. The Commission is wanting in activism, but the government is even more guilty. The Commissions themselves have been set up with so much reluctance, that many of them are mere tokens. Despite that, about 850 applications have been filed in Rajasthan in the last 15 days. A woman who was a rape victim, was allotted a lakh and twenty five thousand rupees from the Chief Minister's Fund, and she had not received it. In Beawar there was a man who's been fighting for the entitlement(patta)to his land; a small plot in an urban colony for many years. He applied under RTI and he has got the patta. There are many examples of poor people who have got wheat quotas denied to them for months and a year or more, the right to scrutinize their land records, the right to see file notings, to examine the process of procuring caste certificates and so on. The key to all this is the penalty clause that makes an officer liable for a personal penalty of 250 rupees for delaying or denying information to any applicant without adequate reasons.

But the RTI is more than fighting corruption. It is an attempt to reclaim democracy and make democratic institutions work for the majority of the people in this country. When we sat in Dharna on Beawar in 1996 a lawyer came and said to us in Hindi : ये तो बहुत अच्छी मॉग है, मगर आप को कभी ज़िन्दगी में नहीं मिलने वाला है। अरे भाई एक सादी गली व्यवस्ता की कलेजी मॉग रहे हो, वो बाहर लिकलके थोडिना रखेगा ! सवाल ही नहीं है।

The law gives us hope. It gives everybody a chance to engage and intervene with governance. If you sit back and pass it on, nothing will happen. We will wait like Godot, forever. The middle class has always wanted to fight its wars by proxy. In a democracy you and I have to fight our own battles, and every battle strengthens the movement to protect democracy. To begin with each one of us needs to file one application each, and test the system and strengthen it.

The second extraordinary piece of legislation which has been passed by the Parliament in 2005 is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. It is the first piece of social legislation in India which provides a legal guarantee where the state has to deliver on its commitment to the poor, or provide an unemployment allowance. It provides the poorest in this country some measure of security to guard against hunger, but even more importantly provides the unorganized in rural India a platform for mobilization. It has immense significance in the context of neo liberal globalisation where the state in countries around the world, has been withdrawing from all manner of social commitments. It is the first step in the peoples claim of a right to work.

The NREGA guarantees every rural household 100 days a year of manual work at minimum wages within a five kilometer radius. A failure to provide work gives the applicant a right to draw an unemployment allowance.

How will people be able to ensure implementation of this important entitlement? Given India's socio political rural scenario of feudalism, caste and other inequalities, how will the rural poor ensure that they get what is their due? How will they stop leakages and fight corruption? It is here that the two pieces of legislation come together. Transparency provisions and the right to information are important means for workers and their organizations to exercise control over the delivery systems. The now popular mode of Jan Sunwais or public hearings have emerged from the public audits of rural public works programmes designed and controlled by workers organizations in rural Rajasthan. Social Audit measures and processes are emerging as important means and platforms through which citizens control can be exercised as an example of participatory democracy. One simple form of social audit is a public assembly where all the details of a project are scrutinized. However, 'social audit' can also be understood in a broader sense, as a continuous process of public vigilance.

The first stage of the Right to Information is the Proactive disclosure of information, where the government has a duty to inform people. The NREGA and its guidelines lay great emphasis on proactive disclosure, underscoring and strengthening certain provisions contained in the Right to Information Act. It is an indication of how one movement and campaign affects another leading eventually to a change in the culture of governance.

The principle of granting a legal entitlement for work has been conceded under great duress, and it is still a battle every inch of the way. There are attempts to reduce minimum wages, the increase in number of districts has been sluggish. People have not yet realized that the work is demand driven and that they can ask for work at any time of the year. They don't also understand in most parts that the government is bound to give them employment within 15 days, failing which they must be paid an unemployment allowance. There is in fact only one instance in the country of unemployment allowance being paid to a group of workers who had to engage in a protracted agitation to get the unemployment allowance.

But implementation of progressive laws is the most difficult part of Jeremy Cronin's trilogy of challenges in an unequal democracy like India's. Having these two

laws passed was a part of “**making the powerful truthful**”. The RTI faced massive bureaucratic resistance, and the NREGA was fought with doomsday predictions of fiscal collapse flooding the pink papers and English media. The great outcry against allocation of funds for the NREGA has to be both economically and politically challenged. There seems no earthly reason why 60% of the people can't claim 2 % of the GDP. For a family or household in Rajasthan, it means 7,300 rupees a year. This sum of money is spent in 15 days, may be 10 days, may be even in a day by the affluent elite. And it is that very class that bitterly opposed the passage of the NREGA.

The NREGA and the RTI will not change peoples lives in a revolutionary manner, but they have already demonstrated their capacity for mass mobilization. The Suchna evam Rozgar Adikar Abhiyan set up as a platform to monitor RTI and NREGA in Rajasthan, decided to conduct a mass social audit in the district of Dungarpur in Rajasthan in April 2006. Every work site was visited and a 1000 people – workers, representatives of mass organizations, peoples organizations, academics and researchers, ngos, government servants, and others along with the active support of the State and District Administration did a pad yatra of the entire district over a period of 7 days.

It was seen that almost all households had job cards, knew the basic provisions of the Act, but were unclear on the details. Many did not know about the procedure for filing an application. nor of the facilities available at the work site, or the minimum wage. Of the 125,000 strong work force 70 to 80 % were women, there were very few contractors, and no machines were used on the work sites. Muster rolls were available at 99% of the work sites- a phenomenal improvement in the last 5 years in Rajasthan since the implementation of the state RTI ACT in 2000. Social audits have been greeted with protests by local level functionaries, and elected representatives. But, the social audit process has demonstrated a means by which the people can confront the powerful with the truth, and eventually force the powerful to be truthful. It is an indication of how democratic spaces can be created even within an otherwise hostile environment.

The passage of the RTI and the NREGA has enabled people in mass organizations understand some facets of the bargaining power of the vote. Many of us are still surprised that laws like these were passed. We have seen some of the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the political establishment. And we have understood that the vote, with all its imperfections, does ,at least occasionally and in a limited way, express the will of the people. People's movements have

been very ambivalent about the electoral process. Despite accepting the political nature of their work, they have kept a distance from electoral politics. Can the RTI be used as a means of demanding accountability from political parties and democratic institutions. Can we, for instance use the RTI to force power structures into accountability, and by disclosing information in the public domain, make ethical conduct a necessity for governments and citizenry alike. Can the process of transparency help cleanse electoral politics, so that the vote is not so open to blatant manipulation by monetary power.

If we want civil and democratic rights to be protected, and avoid use violence as a means of change, we have no option but to strengthen political processes to establish participatory democracy. We have to build on small victories to bring ourselves closer to revolutionary change, step by step, It is pointless and counter productive to wait endlessly for the revolution.

Making the powerful truthful, helps us recognize our great dilemmas. Forcing political parties and governments to be truthful, is an uphill task. Our failure to do so in some obvious cases, makes the task seem impossible. The most recent example is the issue of displacement in the Narmada valley. In spite of governments own fact-finding teams having established that it was not possible within the next six months to rehabilitate people properly, the Ministers' Groups upholding it, people in Government still insist that these are not "accurate" facts and the Prime Minister delays long enough for pro dam lobby to distort the facts and the court to give an order, that in effect leaves the oustees with no more than empty promises, rhetoric and platitudes.

Let us also look at an example of success. The Delhi Right to Information Campaign and Parivartan, a Delhi based organisation, exposed the contradictions and the lies behind the Delhi Jal Borad and the World Bank proposal to privatize the supply of drinking water. When the 4000 pages of relevant information was sifted and analysed, it came to light that the facts quoted before were technically and otherwise untenable. There was a book I read when I was young called, "How to Lie with Statistics". And that was succinctly what the whole project was. It also proved why access to the decision making processes and opinions contained in file notings were so important for the people to know the truth. The affluent colonies joined the cause of the poorer parts of Delhi, to protest against the project.

Documents are powerful communicators of the truth. Opinions and oral statements do not have the sanctity of papers and records.

The use of the RTI Act has generated fear and discomfort amongst the ruling elite of having to share power and be accountable. There are moves to amend the Act. There may be attempts to add to the list of agencies which should be exempted from disclosing information. Many people in the audience are powerful and influential people- retired civil servants, eminent economists, members of political parties, important social activists – and your voice will make a difference in Delhi. I would like to make an appeal to all of you to use your “clout” to fight any measure that might weaken the Act.

The last but not the least is the engagement with **electoral politics**. How are we going to speak and get our voices heard through the electoral process. In this debate, there are some questions, but no one seems to have any solutions. I do not know if you have any solutions. But one thing that we have used and found useful in Rajasthan is that a credible commitment to transparency can elect Panches and Sarpanches to power. This is a strong deterrent to bribing, corrupting the process. If people can win elections in India with a very modest budget, is it possible in the larger scenario for people to get elected in a similar fashion to Legislative Assemblies and Parliament? I leave it this for you to address.

I will end with quoting Lal Singh. My colleague and a symbol of the extraordinary common sense of the ordinary citizen. Shankar, Nikhil, Lal Singh, Narayan and I were addressing civil servants on a cold winter morning in Jaipur. While Nikhil and I were certainly not Mazdoor or Kisan, Shankar fell in the ambivalent category of a man who had done 17 jobs in 5 years. He worked on all sorts of jobs, from vending to making pakoras. But it fell to Lal Singh, wrapped in a tent to truly represent the working kisan. By the time his turn came, the organisers gave him three minutes, as they said it was time for lunch. He responded by saying that, he would just need a minute to say what he wanted to. What he said, has the same ring of genius and perception as Jerome Cronin’s statement which has been the paradigm of this lecture. He said, and I quote in Hindi :

“हम सोचते है की, सोचने का अधिकार हमे नही मिली तो क्या हम जियेंगे, या नही जियेंगे” he said to them “आप सोचते है की सोचने का अधिकार मिल जाए तो आपकी कुर्सी रहेगी, या नही रहेगी। मगर दोस्तों, हम सबको मिलकर सोचना चाहिए की, की क्या ये देश रहेगा या नही रहेगा।”

(I do not need three minutes, I can make my point in one minute. We wonder whether we will live if we are denied the right to information. You are worried whether you will stay in power if we are granted the right to information. Friends, we should all be collectively concerned about, whether our country will survive without the right to know.)

“और मित्रों, लोकतन्त्र नहीं रहै, और केवल पखण्ड लोकतन्त्र रहै तो हमारी सबकी ज़िन्दगी जाएगी, केवल कुछ चन्द लोगों की नहीं जाएगी जो नरमदा की वाली में बैठे हैं, या कहीं बोम्बे की स्लम्स पे बैठे हैं, या कोई खान मज़दूर है, कोई बान्धवा मज़दूर है, कोई सेन्ट्रल राजस्थान में कोई लोग तो भूख से मर रहे हैं। दोस्तों उनका केवल नहीं होगा, हम बहुत सारे लोग हैं हमें इस तरह दाखिल दोगे तो, इस देश में सिविल वार होगा, वयलेन्स होगा, डिमान्डस होंगे, आपकी ज़िन्दगी भी खराब होगी, हमारा भी खराब होगा तो चडजये जब हमें मौका है या नहीं। बाद में समय वापस नहीं आता है, इसलिए अभी चिन्ता जनक टाइम है, जो हमारे पास समय है इसका सदुपयोग करे, जहाँ तक लड सके हम लडे और इसको हम सुरक्षित रखे, और ये नहीं भूले की इस देश की आज़ादी के लिए बहुत जबरदस्त लडाई होकर हम आज़ाद हुई हैं और उस आज़ादी को सही मडने में हमारे बीच में लाना है, तो आप लोगों को बोलना ही होगा, आप किसी तरीके से बोलें, आप जहाँ मरजी बोलें, आप जैसे चाहे बोलें, आप कैसे प्रेशर ग्रूप कैसे बनाए।”